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SUBJECT: (Vodka) Shots Reported Across the China-Vietnam Border

REF: HANOI 23; HANOI 134; 08 HANOI 1094

A) Hanoi 23, B) Hanoi 134, C) 08 Hanoi 1094

SUBJECT: (Vodka) Shots Reported Across the China-Vietnam Border

¶1. (SBU) On November 18, Vietnam and China signed a series of accords to implement the historic 2008 agreement demarcating Vietnam's 1,400-kilometer land border with China (ref A). According to contacts familiar with the negotiations, the agreement was hastily concluded December 31, 2008 to meet a ten-year deadline established when the two sides opened discussions in January 1999. Among the most contentious issues remaining to be discussed was the exact placement of border markings at the Ban Gioc waterfall, a picturesque and remote site in the karst hill country separating Vietnam's Lang Son province and Guangxi. The November 18 accords, among other things, settled the Ban Gioc boundary and set the stage for discussions on joint tourist development.

¶2. (SBU) On November 19 -- the day after the signing of the accords -- PolOff visited the Ban Gioc waterfall, and met with officers from the Army Border Guards and a representative from the Lang Son People's Committee and External Relations Office. Visibly drunk, the commander of the Border Guards, who introduced himself simply as Major Hoa, explained that he had just concluded an informal "consultation" session with his Chinese counterparts across the river, which he said took place monthly or whenever circumstances required. Hoa was hard-pressed to enumerate what those circumstances might be, but eventually said that tourists sometimes fell into the water. He bristled at the suggestion that Ban Gioc was a "hotspot," though he conceded that the border had been "sensitive." Mostly, though, Hoa seemed nonplussed that it was an issue at all. Hoa showed PolOff the newly installed border marker on the Vietnamese side of the falls, pointing to the Chinese marker on the other bank, as well as a cleared area near the water that he said would eventually accommodate tourists from both countries. He said that he did not know the location of the exact border in the waterfall, adding that it was a waterfall and nobody can go across it. "What are a few meters anyway," he concluded, "if it means that Vietnam and China are at peace and can prosper together."

Comment: In Vino Veritas

¶3. (SBU) Hoa has a point. Negotiations over Ban Gioc took on major symbolic significance last year among nationalistic-minded intellectuals in Hanoi and HCMC and the overseas dissident community, with territorial concessions -- real and imagined -- cast as craven kowtowing. In reality, however, the border accords removed a potential source of friction between China and Vietnam. This was a significant achievement, as we noted when the agreement was signed, particularly given that the 1979 war with China that left up to 20,000 Vietnamese dead was precipitated by a border dispute, even if its root cause was Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia (ref B). As if to reinforce the point, on the road back to the provincial capital of Cao Bang, the ERO representative, Ly The Toan, pointed to villages that had been leveled during China's two-month incursion 31 years ago. It is useful to keep in mind the stakes as Vietnam strives to manage pragmatically its asymmetrical relationship with China (ref C).
Michalak